

California gives water proposal yet another try

Three previous plans on Delta diversions scuttled

By Nancy Vogel
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If they were baseball players or criminals, California's water officials would be out.

Three times in the past 16 years, state officials have set out to do right in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where the state's two biggest rivers meet, where Southern California's aqueducts begin, where salmon push out to sea. Three times they have tried to write a plan to protect fish and fill canals. And three times the plans were scuttled.

They're trying again.

On Dec. 15, the federal Environmental Protection Agency is expected to release a new plan to regulate how much water is pumped out of the Delta. The state, too, is expected to release a plan sometime — a plan that sources say will closely resemble one written this year by farm and city water agencies.

The authors of the two plans and state officials now are struggling to close the gaps.

"There's a lot more zeal to get this problem solved and get it solved right than there's ever been before," said Lyle Hoag, director of Cali-

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Delta: Water cutbacks fairly certain

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fornia Urban Water Agencies.

If they succeed — if the state comes up with a plan that meets EPA approval — California will have stepped toward consensus about how to move water through the knot of sloughs critical to its ecological and economic health.

Those who divert water for 20 million people and thousands of square miles of farmland say they want a plan that gives them certainty about supply. Environmentalists seek to protect Delta species already on the endangered list and others poised to land there.

If the state and EPA release divergent plans, it will be another "train wreck," said B.J. Miller, a consultant working for the urban and farm water users.

"We'll go back into the great California pastime, which is fighting about the Delta," he said, and lawsuits are likely.

The EPA plan would ask water users in a critically dry year to give up 1.3 million acre-feet of water on top of what existing water quality standards cost them, said Patrick Wright, Bay-Delta manager for the EPA. The additional water is enough to supply all the people living in San Diego, Riverside, Orange and Ventura counties for a year.

The water users' plan calls for

giving up 1 million acre-feet — in addition to the cost of meeting current water quality standards — during a critically dry year, said Miller.

In years of average precipitation, the plans would require giving up 600,000 and 300,000 acre-feet, respectively. For comparison's sake, an average of 5 million acre-feet a year is exported from the Delta to farms and homes.

Either plan will mean cutbacks for farmers and an investment in conservation, reclamation and water transfers for cities, said Hoag. Rates in water-rich cities like Sacramento may rise slowly, if at all, but from Ventura County to San Diego, wholesale water rates could double over the next decade or two, he said.

The two most important differences between the plans, sources said, have to do with the San Joaquin River and the pumps in the western Delta that fill the canals of the state's two biggest water projects.

The EPA plan calls for water agencies to release twice as much water to the San Joaquin River in the spring as would be required under the water users' plan, said Wright.

In the second key difference, water users focus on keeping fish out of the Delta pumps in March, April and May. But the EPA said

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it is more important to slow the pumps in January and February, when typically more endangered species are killed.

Sources said the state has not yet decided whether to adopt some or all of the water users' proposal or when to announce its plan.

EPA officials said they hope the state waits until Dec. 15 for a joint announcement. But some water users are urging the state to reassert its control over the Delta and release its plan before the EPA. But such a move, some said, would destroy much hard work.

"It would be a real shame, having gotten this far, to see things blow up," said Gary Bobker of the Bay Institute.

Hoag of the urban water association said he "would like it very much" if the state unveiled its plan at the same time as the EPA.

"Then it could be a good, old-fashioned debate about the differences that remain," he said.

Since it first wrote Delta standards in 1978, the State Water Resources Control Board has tried to revamp them three times. The board withdrew the first draft in 1988 after protests from all sides. The second was rejected by the EPA in 1991, and Gov. Pete Wilson revoked an interim plan last year.

So in this latest go-round, the state water board shifted the bur-

den to its critics and told water users that if they could agree upon a plan with enough environmental protection, the board might approve it.

The state's 11 biggest urban water agencies, irrigation districts on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, and other water users spent \$1 million on scientific studies and wrote standards that many people expect will be the basis of the state's upcoming plan.

The EPA is involved because it must, under the federal Clean Water Act, step in when a state fails to write its own water quality standards.

The EPA can approve or reject whatever plan the state water board releases, but it cannot force the state to enforce the EPA plan.

Federal wildlife agencies, however, can force the state to limit pumping or give up water for winter-run chinook salmon and the Delta smelt, both endangered. The federal agencies have decided those measures - which would cost about 1 million acre-feet of water in a critically dry year - are necessary to protect the species and are part of the EPA plan, said Wright.

The EPA can enforce those measures if the state fails to get a water plan in place.